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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

The role of official statistics in an evolving communication society

Note by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Summary

With the rapid evolution of the digital world in recent years, the way of communicating and retrieving information has changed dramatically in our society. People are increasingly relying on social media as their main source of information. If National Statistical Offices are to remain relevant, they must ensure that official statistics are present in social media, providing the factual statistical information people need to make informed decisions.

With this objective in mind, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development organized a conference in October 2017 on the role of official statistics in an evolving communication society. This document provides an overview of the key takeaways of the conference, notably as regards to knowing and adapting to new audiences, responding to alternative evidence, fostering a strong social media community, and humanising data by telling stories that speak to people.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication" for discussion.

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I. Introduction

1. Official statistics provide people with the reliable data they need to form opinions; however, the way in which young people are accessing information today is changing at a rapid pace, with social media being one of the main sources of news. It is therefore imperative to ensure that the information being shared on social media is factual, accurate and unbiased. Official statistics are essential in making this happen. With this in mind, under the auspices of the OECD Committee on Statistics and Statistical Policy, on 5-6 October 2017, the OECD hosted a conference on the role of official statistics in an evolving communications society. The purpose of the conference was to address the challenges that National Statistical Offices (NSOs) and International Organisations with official statistical activities (IOSs) face in remaining relevant in a rapidly-evolving world and help them develop new communication strategies[1]. This document outlines the key takeaways of the conference.

II. How opinions are formed in the 21st century

2. People and tools have always been considered as separate entities. However, the digital revolution is closing the gap between man and machine. Indeed, the world is entering an era of unprecedented technological intimacy.

3. Specifically, four hidden forces can be identified as being key in shaping people's opinions. First, the world is now abundant with data, creating an evolution in our relationship with information. While people were once taught to think in limited and fixed end-terms, the world is now unlimited and open ended in information, which impacts people's cognitive abilities and attention spans. To cope with this rapid change in information sharing, people should cultivate a mind-set of "information zen", understanding that it is no longer possible to know everything. Second, digitalisation has created a new reality and culture where personalised content has affected objectivity. With everyone able to publish online, opinions are morphing into beliefs. Third, the rise of newfound 'digital DNA' is seeing people embed their values into technological code. Modern technology is now the manifestation of people's belief systems. Lastly, the information economy itself is a hidden force. The post-truth world is run like a business, where it is facilitating shifts of behaviour amongst people.

4. How can NSOs and IOSs navigate this post-truth environment? Having people from outside of the statistical community help statisticians think about these issues is critical. Also, good statistical indicators and good policies is only the beginning of influencing people's opinions. Indeed, people are not always rational economic and social beings. Therefore, organisations need to engage in a different kind of discussion in their respective communities in order to combat this new era of disinformation. OECD has launched the New Approaches to Economic Challenges (NAEC), which looks into these issues by bringing other fields together (such as sociology, history, etc.).

III. Who is our audience and how are they getting their facts?

5. NSOs and IOSs are trying to reach very diverse audiences today and often find themselves torn on how to best disseminate information to these audiences. Organisations

[1] The first day of the conference gathered Heads of NSOs and IOSs, sociologists, communications experts, journalists, academics, policy experts and students while the second day was limited to Director-Generals, Chief Statisticians and Communication Officers of NSOs and IOSs.

should therefore look at the supply and demand of information. Specifically, NSOs and IOSs should look at the demand for facts, and not just supply them blindly. For example, while social media is the main source of news for 18-24 year olds, TV news is still the main source of news across all age groups amongst OECD countries. NSOs and IOSs must therefore disseminate their data accordingly.

6. NSOs and IOSs have become comfortable with disseminating information to an already-informed public. However, organisations should remain aware that the general public is not necessarily informed at the same level. NSOs and IOSs need to make 'data cool', by making it relatable.

7. Organisations should also experiment, learn and adapt to the conversations that are already happening online, and join them accordingly. This will allow NSOs and IOSs to appeal as much to the heart as to the mind, as the emotional story is far more compelling. In order to reach out to a larger audience, organisations should work with partners to amplify their message and strengthen their branding strategy as brands inspire trust. Finally, organisations should not be afraid to hire new skills and think outside of the box.

IV. Differentiating between fact and fiction: How is "alternative evidence" created and propagated?

8. 'Alternative evidence' is an unfortunate reality that is plaguing social media and news outlets more generally. There is an inherent danger in misinforming the public which places greater responsibility on NSOs and IOSs to protect their brand as the trusted source of facts. *Google News Lab* and the *International Fact-Checking Network* for example have succeeded in debunking fake news stories and have developed partnerships with NSOs to help verify information and fight against the creation of alternative evidence.

9. However, debunking incorrect stories is a complex task, since corrections of false news may reach different people than the original news. Also, corrections of rumours can backfire, so organisations should position themselves as the trusted source of information, and ensure that fact-checkers have the facts they need to make the necessary corrections. Partnerships are therefore pivotal in combatting fake news and ensuring the correct information reaches the right audiences. In addition to partnerships, organisations should make it easy for people to link to the facts directly on their official websites and can amplify their message through videos and other visual tools that have proven to be impactful in debunking alternative evidence.

V. Building stronger social media communities and reaching out to those who matter

10. Social media is not only about communicating outwards but also about listening. Developing strong social media communities helps to further expand NSOs' and IOSs' reach. This is done through listening, adding value, engaging and sharing insights. It is also important to use the most popular social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.) effectively. Indeed, different social media channels fit different audiences and different purposes. Organisations need to adapt their content to suit each platform.

11. The success of social media today is that it empowers users and communities that would otherwise be impossible to connect with. As such, NSOs and IOSs must leverage this incredible opportunity. Through targeted outreach on various channels, and by tracking the performance of that outreach with metrics, organisations have the possibility to bolster their strategies and reach a wider audience.

12. Social media strategies need to be considered as part of an organisation's wider communications plan in order to amplify the impact of the data being disseminated, and NSOs and IOSs should share experiences amongst each other.

VI. Humanising data to tell stories that speak to social media users

13. The purpose of 'humanising data' is to tell a relatable and digestible story that speaks to people and audiences. Also, if organisations can prompt an emotional response from their audience, the message is more likely to be retained. As people enjoy finding out about others and themselves, using real-life examples and exposing the human element in a dataset tends to get people's attention as it allows them to see where they fit in the bigger picture. In fact, statistics being presented do not necessarily need to be exciting; if they talk to the people, they will be interesting.

14. Organisations need to provide succinct quality content that people can easily grasp and can understand after a single reading. In order to succeed in this goal, NSOs and IOSs should strive to provide a narrative by training writers to write in plain language. It is also important to be "bilingual", speaking both the technical and non-technical language so as not to compromise on the rigour of the data being communicated.

VII. What social media strategies for National Statistical Offices and International Organisations with official statistical activities: Partnering for success

15. Partnerships are key to strengthening NSOs and IOSs' communication strategies. To this end, while the media community may be, at times, misinforming the public, they should continue to be an important partner for NSOs and IOSs.

16. There is also a need to further develop literacy and understanding of statistics. NSOs and IOSs may want to target schools (including those who write school curriculums), teachers, parents and families, sports groups and the gaming industry to attain this objective.

17. Before starting to develop partnerships, NSOs and IOSs should follow several steps in planning these, including: clarifying the issue, identifying the audience, exploring partnership and format opportunities, deciding on the appropriate channels and tone of the messages. Indeed, the more contextual outreach efforts are, the likelier they are to create strong and lasting partnerships. Lastly, while NSOs and IOSs may want to focus only on partnering with one or two organisations, it may be beneficial to create an exhaustive list of potential partners and then determine what can be done with each partner.

VIII. What social media strategies for NSOs and IOSs: Building communities and delivering the right information

18. Although the need to build strong social media communities is recognised, situations differ between countries, with small statistical offices having fewer resources to invest in this task. There is also a need to establish a better understanding in NSOs and IOSs between the statisticians/experts and the communication experts.

19. In terms of strategy, re-shaping the story so people can learn to trust NSOs and IOSs as the main source of official data and news is critical. Partnering with journalists and

education ministries is a good strategy to help attain this goal. Organisations must also be willing to take a risk, engaging fully with the social media community by interacting with their followers, and creating a unique personality online, in order to stand out.

20. Building trust within communities is a challenge; organisations need to be creative in how they put out information to help build a positive reputation. In order to identify what communities NSOs and IOSs are failing to reach, they could start by identifying who they are trying to reach, and where and how these target audiences are consuming information.

IX. Key takeaways

21. Over the course of the Conference, it became clear that bringing the statistical community together with the non-statistical community to discuss communication in a social media driven world was a useful exercise. NSOs and IOSs are in a powerful position to communicate as they are disseminating high quality and relevant statistical data that can have an impact on society. Nonetheless, NSOs and IOSs need to convey complex issues in simple ways online while remaining rigorous and ensuring that data are not over-simplified. Social media is only one part of organisations' overall communications strategies, audiences not on social media should not be neglected, and a good balance needs to be found. There is no single approach, and if NSOs and IOSs are to resonate with their audiences they need to know who these are.

22. Ultimately, NSOs and IOSs should devote more time to discovering what it takes to be successful online, to change their social media culture, and to become more outspoken while keeping their principles in mind.

X. Future goals

23. Data is growing at a rapid pace worldwide today. The speed, volume and reach of today's digital information flows are creating conditions for misinformation, fake news and false 'evidence' to thrive. OECD intends to continue to tackle this problem through its NAEC initiative, specifically through the organisation of future workshops that will seek to underpin the functioning of social media and assess social media's positive and negative influence on the judgements, decisions and actions of citizens, companies, policymakers, and civil society. Beyond this, OECD is developing new statistics and new tools to better understand how economies work today. Information sharing and the exchange of best practices among NSOs and IOSs is critical to ensuring that our communications do not become obsolete in a rapidly evolving world of media.